

THE BUTTON THIEF

IN TWO PARTS—Part I.

BY ARTHUR STRINGER

SKEEL, the mild eyed young expert of the Amalgamated Wireless, began to realize that he was going to be late. And the thought of being late at this, his first official dinner in Washington, made him desperate. He took a deep breath, thrust a determined thumb knuckle down between his Adam's apple and the starched linen that abraded it, and, throwing back his head, raised his elbows outward and upward, until his whole attitude was strangely like that of a gosling essaying its first aerial flight.

He remembered, as he continued to struggle with that refractory collar, that he had been calm enough down in the huge banquet hall. But that was different; for there he had work to do, and he was more at home adjusting pilot lamps and audions and pancake syntonizers than fitting evening dress to his own sedentary limbs. Yet the thought of it all had thrilled him a little, as he worked side by side with Lieutenant Verdu of the Signal Corps, concealing his microphone wires under the smilax draped table; for later in the evening the Chief of Staff of the War Department and six flag officers of the navy and the President of the United States himself were all to sit there and receive auricular proof of the Skeel improvement on radiotelephony apparatus for active service. And Skeel himself, as the operator at the Washington city navy yard sent his experimental messages arrowing across the night into those august ears, was to speak a few words in explanation of his new instrument. And when the flashlight was taken Skeel would be there at the speakers' table, cheek by jowl with the great men of his country.

But the mild eyed young electrician had been held up on the hotel roof with his balky antennæ, and Burchard and the two De Forest delegates had already dressed and made their way down to the crowded and buzzing banquet hall. So, as Skeel stood there before the mirror, struggling forlornly with his overstiff linen, a fine perspiration began to bathe his body. He was getting hot and nervous and defeating his own ends. So he dropped his arms, with a gasp, and crossed to the window and opened it.

He stood there letting the cooling night breeze bathe his heated body. He mentally admonished himself to calm down. He stared out through the darkness where Washington, the soul of his country, the center and heart of the land he loved, lay all about him, mysterious and muffled and vaguely intimidating. In the morning, he told himself, he would have time to explore it, to wander idly about those streets and walls and domes that stood so mistily alluring in the equable Southern night. Then he remembered that he still had his collar to button. He took a deep breath and turned back to the tilted mirror at the other side of the room.

Still again, in his nervous hurry, he struggled to force the stud top through the uncompromising starched linen. He fretfully wondered why some genius could not invent an elastic collar, one capable of adjusting itself to any manner of neckband. And, as he made a final effort to penetrate that armor plate of cotton harveyized with cooked starch, the collar button itself broke under the strain.

Skeel stood looking down at the useless button shank, once more moist with apprehension. It was the final blow! What could he do? How would it end?

He was already deplorably late. Of that fact he was only too sure. And he was to sit at the speakers' table, on the dais backed by draped flags. And he would make a pretty sight sidling in, with the dinner half over and his collar ends tied down with a piece of shoelace!

It was too much for Skeel's overtried nerves. The sheer ridiculousness of the dilemma exasperated him. His hour of triumph was being eclipsed by a bit of metal no bigger than a dime! His peace of mind was being wrecked on a puny metal collar button.

HE suddenly crossed the room and flung open the door. He called fretfully across the corridor to his friend Burchard. But the congestion below stairs seemed to have drawn the last human corpse from the upper floors—there came no answer to his call. The place seemed to be deserted. A desolating sense of helplessness crept through the man with the broken collar button.

Skeel stood in the doorway for an irresolute moment or two. Then he slipped across the silent corridor and stepped into Burchard's bedroom. Its occupant, as he had expected, was no longer there; but there was a forlorn chance, the intruder felt, that his friend might have left one stray collar button somewhere about the bureau behind him.

A feverish search, however, resulted in nothing. And at every step time was being lost, precious time! So Skeel,



Then Came a Sudden Tirade in Which the Word "Panama" Occurred.

tiptoeing along the lonely corridor, tried the next door, and then the next. He assured himself, as he examined the dresser tops and the drawers of the third room, that he was still in the region given over to his dinner associates. But he was still without his collar button.

So he advanced to yet another door, which he found to be locked, and in his desperation essayed still another. This last door he found unlocked. But he swung it open without hesitation; for the whole thing was now something more than a laughing matter. He noticed, as he stepped inside, that this room was much larger than the others; but he gave neither this nor the ornateness of its furniture one moment's conscious thought. He crossed straight to the wide topped bureau of polished mahogany. His mind by this time was centered on but one thing.

As his eye wandered about that crowded bureau top, he gave a sudden little gasp of relief; for there, between a cutglass vaporizer and a manicure set, stood a bone collar button!

It was not until he had caught it up in his hand that he became aware of the more luxurious fittings of the room in which he found himself, of the more personal note that seemed to pervade everything about him. He missed that air of transience that marked the humbler chambers he had left behind him. As he stood there, a little intimidated by the shaded globes and cutglass and chased silver shimmering about him, he deliberated whether he should leave a nickel on the bureau top as a more or less humorous compensation for what he was appropriating. Then, as he looked about at the green velvet portière covering the halldoor, at the soft toned draperies receding into unbroken shadow, at the scattering of monogrammed toilet accessories, he became disturbingly conscious of something distinctly feminine about the place. His startled nostrils could even detect the vaguely residuary aroma of toilet water and orris root. The thought came home to him, in a sort of sickening flash, that he had actually invaded a woman's boudoir!

THE next flash of thought brought home to him that he had done an audacious and even a perilous thing. And as he realized this he became equally anxious to realize his escape. He stood there, pondering what might happen if he were seen stepping out through that portière draped door. Then a fear even more determinate took possession of him as the sound of approaching steps fell on his ear. When these steps came to a stop in the hallway without, a shiver of actual terror went careening up and down the intruder's backbone. Some one, Skeel knew, was about to enter that room!

Instinctively, and quick as thought, he darted across the muffling carpet to a door that stood half open on his left. He imagined, in his sudden blind panic, that this second door might lead to some second means of egress. He ran for it as a rat runs for its hole. He slid into it, coming up short against a white tiled wall and swinging the door almost shut behind him. He knew, as he did so, that he had only been driven deeper into his trap, that he had merely invaded an unlighted bathroom. He stood there, tingling with humiliation, watching the crack of light in front of him. He waited, with his heart in his mouth, as the outer door was slammed shut and the portière rings once more tinkled along the curtain rod.

Then came the sound of steps again, crossing the room to within ten feet of where he stood. Then came the sound of a chair being moved, and then the click of a light-switch, brightening the pencil of luminosity at which he was peering.

About Skeel's adventure there was no longer anything laughable. It was now something abhorrent and unexplainable, something calamitous. Here he was, caught and cornered in a stranger's room like a sneak thief! He was in a trap that could lead to nothing but indignity, from which he could imagine no escape! He was in a dilemma from which no amount of explanation could extricate him! He had visions of himself being seized and handed over to the house detective, of being hauled collarless before unsympathetic magistrates, of appearing in the next day's police reports, and of being pointed out, not as the exponent of the improved pan-



A Revolver as Exotic Looking as the Beard.

cake tuner, but as a hotel thief caught red handed at his nefarious pursuits.

SKEEL stood there, clinging to the glass towel bar beside him, wondering what his first possible move would be and how he could make that move. He heard the sudden scratch of a match, the sound of pacing feet again, and then a contemplative and throat clearing cough. Yet the depth and volume of that cough assured Skel of one thing. His enemy was not a woman! It was a man who had stepped into the room and stood there between him and his freedom.

Skel was further relieved a moment later to sniff the odor of cigarette smoke, of half familiar and heavy smelling smoke, that promptly made him think of New York and its Syrian Quarter; yet he found something tranquilizing and reassuring about this smell, so much so that he shifted his position a little, that he might peer out through the crack of the door into the lighted room.

Directly in front of the bureau top where he had stood a minute or two earlier, Skel saw in profile the figure of a man. It was a tall and massive figure, military looking in its uprightness. And at the moment this figure was calmly and contentedly studying its own reflection in the huge square of bevel plate glass above the bureau top.

Skel, without any touch of this content, also regarded the motionless reflection. He saw the immaculate evening clothes, the upright body, the bearded face, the solidly poised head. He saw too that the intruder was a foreigner, that there was something unmistakably Slavlike in the set of the face, in the contour of the bony-skulled head, in the imposing and studiously cared-for beard.

Skel stood staring at this face, so touched with self sufficiency, so redolent of vanity, that it became something obnoxious to the eye. He stood staring at the pink and white of the assiduously manicured skin, at the back-thrust shoulders that made the breast stand out like that of a pouter pigeon, at the rounded and polished dome of the skull where the attrition of time was perversely visible.

On the sides of this skull, Skel could see, the hair had grown incredibly long, and had then been brushed in thin, straight lines across the arching dome, which in the bare spots shone as though it had been polished and oiled. He noticed that the white, full, bulging forehead also shone, like metal scrupulously polished, in the cross-light from the two electrics that flanked the mirror frame. He even noticed the small, pink colored, close set ear above the white linen collar. Then his eyes traveled on to the thick, full neck which wrinkled like unwieldy rubber above the encircling starched band and seemed as big as the entire back of the head into which it merged.

But the thing that most held Skel's attention was the beard. There seemed something exotic and foreignizing about it, something militant and challenging. Yet, even while it carried a note of the autocratic, of the imperial, there was a suggestion of fastidious self consciousness about it, as though day by day arduous hours had been consecrated to the creation of its sleek beauty, as though a lifetime of care had gone to its preservation.

Skel, as he looked at that flowing appendage which bore such open testimony as to the years it had been trimmed and scented and trained and stroked, promptly took a dislike to its owner. Yet, mingled with his vague disgust, was an equally vague sense of admiration. He could not deny that the placid and overstatelike figure so calmly studying itself in the mirror possessed a suggestion of power. He felt that under that outer mask of softness, of feminine vanity, ran a coarser vein of cruelty, very much as under the full lipped and over-ruddy mouth ran the twin rows of teeth that were hard and white and no less purposeful for being hidden.

BUT all further thought on this matter was suddenly scattered, scattered like meal when a horse sneezes in a feedbox; for the utter silence was rent by a sound that, even before it could be comprehended, sent the chain lightnings of terror skyrocketing up and down Skel's startled body.

It was a second or two before he could realize just what had caused this short-circuiting of consciousness. Then he saw that it was nothing more than the shrill ring of a telephone bell on the bedroom wall, not ten feet away from where he stood.

He saw the white fronted figure with the majestic beard turn and slowly cross the room. Shrinking farther back into his corner, Skel could hear him lift the receiver from its hook. He could hear the deep and sonorous voice as it breathed its strangely foreign sounding "Hello!" into the transmitter. Then came a low and cautious monosyllable or two. These were followed by a shower of questions and retorts, quick and tense; but all in a tongue that was incomprehensible to the listening Skel.

He at least knew it was neither French nor German, and he suspected it was neither Spanish nor Italian. He became more and more convinced, in fact, that the man at the telephone was a Russian and that he was now speaking in his native tongue. As he listened to that calm and authoritative voice, he was again oppressed by some vague sense of power, of dynamic possibilities, of something sheathed and unparaded, about this bearded stranger who was so unwittingly keeping him a prisoner there. He remembered, with a nettling of resentment, that many precious minutes had already slipped by. He even suspected that he was already too late for the flashlight, the flashlight in which he had so wanted to see himself seated at the speakers' table. He also realized, as he shifted his body so as to command a view of the lighted room in front of him, that he was as far from freedom and the banquet hall as ever;

for the Russian, having hung up the receiver, had recrossed the room.

Once more he stood in front of the mirror, placidly and contemplatively stroking his beard. There was something suggestive of a house cat in both his expression and the movement itself. He stood there purring—Skel felt that "purring" was the one and only word for it—purring with a sort of smiling and impassive contentment which was as odious to the eavesdropper as was that sleek and scented beard that still flaunted like a pennant of patriarchal self sufficiency. The purring stranger, for some mysterious reason, seemed well satisfied with himself. The mild eyed youth so silently studying his movements could not help wondering as to the nature and name of the canary that had been swallowed in front of that telephone transmitter.

Skel, as he continued to squint out at the stranger, saw him slowly remove his dresscoat, step to a door directly opposite the bathroom door, and disappear inside. He emerged a moment later, thrusting his arms through the sleeves of a dressing jacket. This garment was soft and rough, and it seemed to be made of camel's hair, with facings and frogs of silk. Its wearer passed a large white hand approvingly down the side of it, stood for a moment in thought, and then took a ring of keys from his pocket.

Then he stepped to a cabinet on the right of the bureau, a cabinet that at first glance looked very much like a large sized gramophone case. With one of the keys he unlocked the polished mahogany doors that covered the face of this cabinet.

Skel, watching him closely, could see him stoop low over what proved to be nothing more than a steel safe-front. A moment later he could hear the ring and click of metal against metal. He surmised that the Russian was at work on the combination lock of the inner safe doors. This surmise was confirmed a moment later, when those narrow doors themselves were swung open and the stooping man, reaching apparently into a drawer at the top of the safe interior, rose to his feet with a puff of relief. Then he swung the doors shut again, locking the safe and giving the nicked dial a careless spin.

Skel gasped a little as he became aware of the fact that the Russian was holding a revolver in his hands, a silver plated, pearl handled revolver with an uncommonly long barrel, as exotic looking as the beard that bent over it. Then the stranger dropped the revolver into the side pocket of his camelhair jacket, meditatively stroked his beard, and moved once more in front of the mirror, where he once more stood purring contentedly and triumphantly at his own reflection.

THIS tableau was interrupted by a sudden light tap on the outer door of the room. It came so suddenly, out of the utter quietness, that Skel was again the subject of those telegraphic disturbances heralding the affliction known as gooseflesh. Whether the Russian answered to that knock Skel could never be quite sure. He could see, however, that it had neither startled nor discomfited the man in the outer room; for the placid and purring look was still on his face as the door swung open and a woman dressed in black stepped quickly inside.

This woman, Skel noticed, did not advance into the room. The moment the door was closed she stood against it, apparently with one hand still resting on the knob and with the green velvet portière swinging against one of her shoulders. Her face itself he could not clearly see; for she wore a veil. But he found himself held by some suggestion of tensely, of concealed and uncomprehended drama, in the stately and somber figure with its eyes fixed so intently on the face of the Russian.

So appealing was this figure, so suggestive was it of dramatic possibilities, that a wave of disappointment swept through Skel as she started to speak to the man calmly regarding her from the bureau edge where he stood; for her words were in a tongue unknown to the secret listener, as were the Russian's calm and gruff noted retorts. Skel could see, however, that she was speaking under intense excitement. He was not unconscious of the emotional appeal in her voice. This emotional appeal was deepened when with a nervous hand she thrust the veil up from her face, and he caught sight of the well modeled chin, the thin and high bridged nose, the lustrous and overalert eyes set wide apart under the white brow made even whiter by the mass of dark hair behind it. She too had a touch of the exotic. Skel could detect it in each fluent and passionate gesture, in each line of the thin face, in each movement of the lithe body with its constant and reiterative up-thrust of shoulder and fluttering outthrust of hand. She too, he surmised, was a Russian. And again he was swept with regret that every word she was saying was being lost on him. It was the same mingling of exasperation and helplessness that had filled him when he had watched a famous French actress enact an emotional Sardou melodrama without giving him one clue to what it was all about.

The woman seemed to be explaining at first, and then protesting. Her colleague, as he listened, appeared to be quite unmoved by her expostulations. As her talk became more torrential, his position seemed to become more assured, more obdurate. He turned to her at last, and as he released his own quiet toned torrent of words he impressed Skel as in some way her master, as in some way holding the whip hand over her. And, floating along on the quick currents of their talk, he could catch an occasional word that meant something to him, words such as "Paree" now and then, and "New York" once or twice, and "Londres" and "Lusitania." Then, at some final more peremptory gesture from her companion, the woman, without advancing from where she stood, suddenly stooped down.

The somewhat puzzled Skel thought at first that it was merely a movement to tie a shoe or tear a shred of hanging lace from an underskirt. To his sudden abashment, however, he realized that she had drawn an oblong packet of blue tinted papers from her stocking. These papers she looked down at for a moment, as though to make sure of their identity. Then she held them out to the Russian. He stepped forward and swept them from her hand with a decision and promptness that rather amazed the watching Skel.

THE woman, now white and passive as a statue, stared at him without moving. She continued to watch him as his hungry eyes ran through the closely folded packet. What it was made up of Skel could not even guess. But it had disappointed him a little to think that they had been carried into that room as they had been carried. The fact that they had been so hidden gave a touch of sordidness to a figure that had otherwise proved so appealing, so capable of touching his romantic imagination. Skel could not analyze his feelings in the matter. All he remembered was that it in some way lowered the tone of a situation from which he had looked for nothing so unbecoming, so incongruous, so discreditable.

But Skel promptly forgot his own feelings in the matter. His attention was fixed on the Russian, who was again going through the papers, one by one. It was now only too plain that these papers were blueprints of some sort. The woman beside the door, as her companion examined sheet by sheet, began to talk again. She was apparently explaining, making excuses, striving to impress on him some fact that he refused to accept or was unable to comprehend. He became more expostulatory, as he looked up at her from time to time, more autocratic, more accusatory, as though indignant at some sin of omission or commission on her part. The woman, in turn, became more earnest in her gesticulations, more passionate in her hurriedly reiterated protests. A subtle change seemed to occur in their relationship. The huge limbed Russian became more than ever the domineering master. The woman seemed to betray herself as more and more under the dictates of his will. They stood facing each other almost as master and servant. Yet about that alert and dark eyed woman there was nothing to imply either subservience or subjugation. She suggested, rather, a guarded secretiveness, as though she held under lock and key some mental chamber which her gross limbed companion should never invade.

Skel's body fairly tingled with anxiety to catch at some key to the enigma, to read some sort of coherence into their clatter of foreign tongues. He ached to know what it was all about. One word alone struck the bullseye of his straining attention, and that was the word "Carey." He heard the woman use it twice, three times, in her Gatling-gun volley of words. He heard the man repeat the name, with a grunt of disdain. Then he looked back at the folded bluesheets of paper, counting them over between his fingers as a ticket speculator counts money held fanwise in his hand.

Then came a sudden tirade, in which the word "Panama" occurred again and again, with the woman objecting, parrying, expostulating, repeating the one tangible word "Wilkie" as she did so. Then, as the papers were checked off, an English phrase or two began to strike on the eavesdropper's ear. He caught the words, "Garrison turrets," and a moment later "mortar batteries." Here and there, bright as metal granules in some dull quartz, the drone of the unknown Russian was stippled with such words as "fortifications" and "torpedo control." Then came what seemed to be geographic terms,—"San Diego" and "Puget Sound," "Fort Wadsworth" and "Fort Hancock."

Then the talk seemed to revert to the problem of "Panama" again; and again the woman explained and protested, until the Russian stepped closer to her and spoke in an unbroken low rumble which scarcely reached Skel's ears. The hidden listener saw her lower the up-thrust veil, speaking through it as she adjusted her hat with her fingertips. And when for the last time he overheard the name of "Wilkie" he began to wonder if the man under discussion was not the Wilkie he had somewhere read of as head of the Secret Service. But he was too busy watching the outer room to give the matter much thought.

He saw the woman turn to the portière draped door and stand there, apparently listening. The man in front of her calmly took out his watch and looked at it. She turned back, with a passionate gesture, and started to speak to him; but he silenced her with one peremptory movement of the hand. They stood there in silence, until a nod of his bearded head seemed to imply that the right moment had arrived. She felt for the doorknob, without speaking, and still looking at him. And, still without speaking, she quietly opened the door and as quietly sidled out into the hallway of the hotel, closing the door after her.

THE huge Russian stood gazing at this door for several seconds. Then he sighed audibly, as though with relief, and turned back to the light. He stood there, stroking his beard and gazing down at the blue tinted packet in his hand. And again his great figure took on that catlike and purring contentment of aspect that seemed to awaken something strangely akin to anger in the mild and sedentary Skel, watching resentful and bewildered through the narrow slit of the door.

The man with the blueprints, still wearing his vague smile of satisfaction, crossed to the cabinet safe, reached a hand down to its combination, and began spinning the dial between his fingers. Then he turned the knob and swung open the heavy steel door.

Then he came to a sudden standstill, with a frown of

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class by themselves. They cost so much money that only those managers with unlimited capital dare handle them. A Montgomery & Stone show costs some seven thousand dollars week in and week out, or an outlay for the season on this one company of over a quarter of a million dollars. Their percentage of the gross receipts averages from seventy to eighty; but it means playing to twelve thousand dollars a week (enormous business), in order to be sure of a profit. Mr. Harris played Mr. Edeson at Oakland, California, with a percentage of seventy and cleared nearly twenty-nine hundred dollars; but Mr. Dillingham playing Montgomery & Stone in the same city, and with the same percentage and same business, would lose money. In order to make money, he would have to play to fifty per cent. more business, which is probably beyond the capacity of the theater. These musical shows entail a great expense in handling the production on the road. Where a dramatic company carries one stage carpenter and one property boy, the musical show needs the services of half a dozen of each, wardrobe women, and besides its own musical director and orchestra; and in "working the show" (i. e., setting and moving stage settings) during performance, double the number of stage hands and fly men.

Cry of Commercialism

THESE purely business conditions have given rise to the taunt of "commercialism" in the theater. There is not a manager in the United States who in making his productions does not strive to present his plays in the most artistic manner his resources and experience permit. He knows perfectly well that he has a discriminating public to deal with, and that a trademark for himself is of supreme importance.

But, as these are days of combinations in other lines of business, so this feature obtains in the theatrical trade. The Klaw & Erlanger and Shubert Syndicates, and John Cort, who is an open door to both, control the theatrical map of North America. As is the case in all other trades, the small dealer is nowhere. The manager with only one attraction, unless it is an important star, is practically eliminated from the game. The manager who can command time with either syndicate is he who has numerous attrac-

tions; for instance, a Broadway success touring the country with several companies. Of course this sounds like monopoly, smothering competition, and so forth, and in a way it is; but it has also resulted in better and more substantial financial conditions for all concerned—notably so for the actor and author, the one being more sure of his salary and the other of his royalties—than under the old régime. Formerly the manager divided his losses with his actors and the author; now the manager who is able to command time with either syndicate is he who is reasonably sure to meet his obligations. And, although the manager may be losing money right along, hoping of course for better days, the author, who is paid a percentage upon the gross receipts, receives his royalty just the same. So much for commercialism in the theater.

It requires more capital to handle the theatrical business, and the running of one or more road companies means a complete business organization, with a clerical force at the main office and all the machinery employed in any other line of commercial endeavor.

Lillian Russell's Luck

BUT luck or its equivalent is a huge factor in the profits of a season. Once Miss Lillian Russell was booked in a good Western town, and when the date came round her manager discovered to his dismay that a big circus was to open its season in that town on the same date.

"Better cancel," said his business manager. "The circus will get all the show money there is in town."

"We've just got one chance, and that is if it rains," said the astute owner of the show. "Let's see what the Weather Bureau predicts."

And sure enough it said, "Rain! Rain! Rain!" And so they prayed and waited. And the night before the circus was to open and Miss Russell to play her date, it began to rain like a second Deluge, and by the time the circus people were ready to open up their ring was six inches deep in water and a postponement was imperative. That night the theater could not hold half the people who stormed the boxoffice, who had come to town to see the circus. Miss Russell got all the show money.

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perplexity on his face. He stood there motionless for several seconds. Then he walked quietly and casually to the hall door, where he once more stood motionless, apparently listening, with the velvet portiere caught up in one white hand on which glimmered a heavily jeweled ring.

The next moment Skeel beheld his captor resort to an unexpected and inexplicable tactic. He saw the bearded figure suddenly cross to the safe and take from it a packet of papers remarkably similar to the one that he carried in his hand. Then he suddenly stepped to where a soft-toned print of Millet's "Goose Girl" hung between two similarly framed pictures on the wall. The center picture he lifted from its hook and placed face down on the safetop. With quick and dexterous thumb and forefinger he withdrew the slender wire nails that held the backing of this picture in place. This backing, a thin slab of pinewood, he next lifted away. He unfolded the two packets of papers, fitted their edges together, and placed them face downward on the picture back. Over them he again adjusted the thin slab of pinewood. Then he restored the wire nails to the holes from which he had withdrawn them. Then he rehung the print of the slender limbed Goose Girl with her water-kissed heel and her sun-kissed body.

He stood off and looked at it, humming to himself as he stroked his sleek and scented beard; then he stepped back to the safe, swung shut the narrow steel doors, and once more spun the dial of the combination lock. Then he crossed the room to a window and, unlocking its sill fastening, quietly raised the sash.

Skeel could sniff the cooler night air that began to drift into the room. He was in a tingle of apprehension, however, at the thought that the Russian was now not more than six paces from him. He again pondered just what he would do if some caprice brought his captor to that door which concealed his uneasy and sweat moistened body.

But the man with the beard seemed to be otherwise engaged. He once more crossed the room, making no noise as he went, and listened beside the door opening into the hall. Then he turned and snapped out the electric lights, leaving only a shaded reading

lamp burning on a desk midway between the cabinet safe and the opened window. Then, having looked studiously about the room, he crossed to this window and stepped out upon what Skeel surmised must have been the platform of a fire escape, leaving the room empty.

THERE was a minute or two of utter silence. This silence was suddenly shattered by the shrill and clangor of the telephone bell on the wall. It rang, and rang still again; but the mysterious Russian, for some reason, preferred to leave the call unanswered.

It suddenly flashed over Skeel that the entire performance was for his own benefit, that the Russian had in some way discovered the fact of the intruder's presence there and was giving him a chance to make his escape without embarrassment. A moment of more sober second thought, however, convinced Skeel of the absurdity of this. He realized that the owner of that room would never dismiss an intruder in any such offhand manner. Yet, even as he realized this, he was possessed of a sudden determination to bolt, to run for it, to get out to freedom before he could be interfered with. He even decided, as he took a deeper breath, that he could get through the door and dodge into his own room, or even into Burchard's, before he could be discerned or captured. And every minute now, he remembered, he was losing time, precious time!

Skeel swung back the door an inch or two, keying himself up for the plunge. He measured the distance between the hallway and the spot where he stood, measured it with quick and decisive eyes. Then he listened for a moment or two, to make sure no sound came from that ever menacing window. Now, he told himself with a fortifying tightening of muscles, was the time! And once more he measured the distance between his prison door and freedom.

But he did not emerge from his prison with the white tiled walls. Instead, he suddenly drew farther back into the darkness of his hiding place; for, even as he stared at that hall door, he saw it silently and slowly open and a figure as silently and slowly step into the room.

To be concluded next Sunday



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gall to do a little thing like that," said William W. Billings. "Strikes me as pretty soft. When do I go?"

"Now," said Tobey, still overcome. "Now!"

"All right," said William W., turning on his heel and going to his desk, where he got his hat, his tan overcoat, his cane, and a magazine that belonged to somebody else.

Before he was ready to go, the rest of the staff had the information that William W. Billings had been sent out to accomplish what the combined brains of journalism and the Government had failed to do,—run down Cyrus K. Cummings and establish beyond doubt his whereabouts. They watched him coolly button his coat, put his foolish green felt hat on his head, light a fresh cigarette, and start for the door. His coolness and assurance were amazing. At the door he stopped, with a sudden thought, and went over to Tobey's desk again.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "I'll need a little money."

Tobey shoved a pink slip, an expense order already made out for a goodly sum, to him. William W. folded it and stuck it in his pocket. "And where shall I get a camera?" he asked.

"Photograph room, you know," said Tobey. "Why?"

"Might get a picture of old what's his name," said William W. carelessly. Then he departed, casting a backward look over the open mouthed crowd in the

city room. As he went out he must have heard the shriek of amused derision, the shout of unholy joy, that followed him to the elevator.

NOT that I give a whoop one way or the other," said William W. to the station agent at Nyack a couple of hours later. "If a nice old gent wants to keep out of the way, I think it's his own privilege. If I owned a couple of trusts, and the Government got too inquisitive about it, I'd let the Government go straight to blazes. But I've been sent up here to get hold of Mr. Cyrus K. Cummings, and the fact that Bass and all the rest of the star reporters have fallen down on the job doesn't worry me a little."

"Mr. Bass is a pretty smart fellow," said the station agent.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. You say Cummings' place is a mile up that way, back from the river? Guess I'll be trotting along."

The station agent watched William W. pass up the street and out of sight, green hat, cane, tan overcoat, and cloud of cigarette smoke. Then he sighed and went back to his work.

In the few minutes' conversation William W. had had with the agent he had discovered a few things which

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THE BUTTON THIEF

IN TWO PARTS—PART II.

By ARTHUR STRINGER

SKHEEL thought at first that it was the same woman he had seen before, the same woman, in somewhat different apparel; but, as he gaped out into the dimly lighted room, he saw that he was mistaken.

It was a young woman, he could plainly enough see; but it was an entirely different woman. She was less angular than the first woman, and not so dark. She seemed less fitted for secret entrances and silent departures. Her very audacity seemed something coerced and achieved. Skeel, as he stared out at her, could see there was something softer, something more rounded, something less mature, about this second figure. However dubious or unsavory the hazard in which she was engaged, she seemed without the metallic hardness, the worldly wise sophistication, of her sister conspirator. There was something incongruous in even her costume; for she was gowned in what Skeel took to be chiffon over blue silk low cut at the throat, and with a blue cloak braided with gold hanging loose over one arm. Her bare neck and shoulders and her free arm shone white, alluringly white, against the green of the portière. Her eyes, wide and yet resolute, had the stare of a child adventuring an unlighted passageway, and through her slightly parted lips her breath was coming quick and short, as though her spirit was conscious of some peril she could not define.

Skeel watched her as she stood there staring into the room. He watched her and promptly forgot his own predicament in the contemplation of a figure so radiant and so touched with mystery. He watched her as she turned and stooped and quietly locked the door and adjusted the green velvet curtain behind her. He watched her as she advanced slowly into the room, listening every now and then, with her head a little on one side, in a movement strangely timorous and birdlike.

A touch of self possession seemed to come to her as her stare slowly circled the chamber in which she stood. Then she dropped her cloak on a chair and crossed quickly to the front of the safe on the right of the bureau.

Skeel slowly swung back his door an inch or two, to get a better view of her. He saw her thrust a hand into the bosom of her gown and from it draw a slip of paper. This she bent over for a moment and placed on the safetop in front of her. Then she dropped on one knee before the safe, and Skeel could see her fingers, white against the black enameled steel, as they slowly and studiously revolved the disk of the combination lock. She stopped once or twice to consult the slip of paper on the safetop; then her hand passed from the lock dial to the metal knob. It seemed to take all her strength to swing back the two narrow steel doors.

She was down now on both knees before the opened safe. Skeel could see the white flutter of her hands as she dabbled and explored about the dark interior of the strongbox, rustling through papers, closing and opening drawers, bending lower and lower over her work. He heard her catch her breath, in something that was almost a sob, as she continued her search. He seemed to participate in her anxiety, to be sharing her peril with her. He seemed to feel the weight of some vast and uncomprehended responsibility on his narrow shoulders. He found himself imitating her posture, as though he too was intent on the discovery of the hidden secret that defied her. The mere poise of the stooping figure, the snowy softness of the drooping shoulders, seemed to win and claim his sympathy. The two of them, he and she, seemed bound together in a fraternity of guilt. They were fellow trespassers.

He tried to carpenter together contingencies that could make her invasion of that chamber as innocent as his own. He tried to tell himself that the two of them were in the same boat, that they were involved in a fellowship of offense which should make him willing to share anything she might be called on to face. And, as he peered out at her, a blur of moving white and azure against the black mass of the safe maw, he was vaguely oppressed by a sense of her fragility at the same time that he was vaguely elated at the thought of her loveliness.

Yet her next movement worried him more than he dared to admit; for he was distinctly aware of the fact that she was thrusting a bundle of papers down into her bosom—and he knew she had taken them from the safe!

SO unconsciously and yet so completely had that silent figure enlisted his sympathies that a stab of terror went through him as he stood peering out there into the dimly lighted room. Between him and the safe-front he saw a second figure pass, the bearded and titanic figure that he had remained so subconsciously in dread of.

It took an effort to keep Skeel from calling out to the woman as she still knelt in front of the safe. His dislike for the Russian, as he watched those silent and stealthy steps, became something active, something acute. It became almost hatred.

Skeel, as he saw the bearded figure creep between the woman and the door and calmly reach out a hand to the light switch, realized his own helplessness, the ignominy of his position, the hopelessness of his predicament. A second wave of feeling, a feeling that was almost pity,

swept through him as he saw the woman's hand go up to her mouth, as though to smother a cry she could not withhold when the light was suddenly turned on.

She rose to her feet, without even turning about. She remained staring at the wall, as though dreading to face what stood behind her. It was the Russian's laugh, quiet and touched with triumph, that broke the silence.

It was then that she turned slowly about and looked at him. Her eyes, Skeel could see, were wide with horror, just as they had been at the moment she first stepped into the room. Her face was almost colorless. Yet into it, as she stared at the man confronting her, there crept something that obliterated the look of fear. It was almost a look of defiance, of forlornly achieved resolution.

"Oh!" she gasped foolishly, with one hand feeling for the safedoor behind her.

The Russian brought his heels together and essayed a bow. In that Continental jackknife bow Skeel could plainly enough detect the touch of mockery, the hint of ironic deference.

"This, Madame, is an honor!" was the man's suave and satyric response. She still stared at him, dazed and helpless. He remained there between her and the door.

"It is always an honor," he repeated, "to be visited by a lady, and by one so beautiful!"

It astonished the listening Skeel to find his bearded friend so complete a master of English. His voice was assured and sonorous. The very preciseness of his intonation seemed to lend an added barb to his words as he uttered them.

The woman, whose head had slowly drooped forward, suddenly looked up at him. Her whole body moved under the stress of the mental effort she was making. There was a flash of something that amounted to almost defiance in her eyes.

"It is not an honor!" she retorted. Although she spoke quietly, her voice still shook a little.

"Pardon," he intoned; "but I insist on regarding it as an honor!" And as he stood gazing at her one white hand caressed the generous curve of his mustache.

"And what do you intend to do about it?" she suddenly asked, as she lifted her gold braided cloak from the chair.

Her enemy shrugged a huge and impassive shoulder. Even his impassivity seemed to intimidate her. The ghost of a shudder swept through her body.

"That, Madame, we can discuss in the morning," and he said the words with the same bland yet pregnant suavity.

IN the morning!" echoed the woman. She looked about the room as though it were a cage, and then back at her captor.

"I am compelled to take an early train, Madame. Indeed, I must leave Washington at five in the morning, to connect with my steamer," he shrugged as he smiled down at her: "for, much as I regret it, verce important affairs compel me to return to Europe."

"And?" asked the woman. The word, as she spoke it, was both short and defiant.

"Need I say more?" he quietly inquired. "You have conferred a great honor on me. So! It would be ungracious of me not to avail myself of it."

She stared at him, white to the lips. "This is absurd, utterly absurd!" she said slowly and distinctly.

"Pardon! No more absurd than this!" he replied, with a placid arm-wave toward the open safe.

"And no more absurd than carrying American war maps back to Germany with you, I suppose," demanded the indignant woman, "and buying up coast defense secrets for Von Heeringen?"

Her tormentor merely stroked his beard. "Our world for tonight, Madame, must remain this humble room, which you have chosen to visit."

"You know why I came here!" cried the woman. And her voice this time came from her throat in a higher pitch.

"To discuss that would be—ungallant," he answered with his continued smooth and ironic courtliness. He even began to relish the answering fear that mounted to her face. He seemed very sure of himself. Yet under that self-assured indifference was every promise of a grim and muffled determination.

"Don't persist in misunderstanding me!" the woman facing him retorted, with a show of anger which in no way perturbed him. "And don't persist in insulting me—in insulting my intelligence!"

The Russian's laugh was low and quiet, little more than a rumble of calm insolence. His very imperturbability seemed to anger her.

"You know who I am—or perhaps it's the servants of my house you remember best, since your business was with one of them."

"You are the most beautiful



The Russian Approached with Silent, Stealthy Steps.

woman in Washington!" he murmured, stroking his beard.

"And I know who you are!" she went on, ignoring his interruption. "You are not Count Sergius Pobloff! You are not a Count at all! Your real name is not even Pobloff! And that woman is not your wife! She never was your wife. She is here doing the same kind of work that you are doing!"

"And what is the nature of that work?" calmly inquired her tormentor.

"To get War Department information, by theft or trickery, Count Pobloff! To steal or buy facts that belong to our Navy Department, just as you stole the blueprints of our coast fortifications from the private desk of Brigadier General Carey!"

"And who is Brigadier General Carey?" mildly inquired her still smiling opponent.

"He's the Chief of Engineers, as you very well know!" was the woman's quick retort.

"And what is Brigadier General Carey to you?" was the next inquiry from the bearded figure.

The woman he faced seemed longer shaken with fear. A sort of second wind of fortitude, of clear sightedness, had come to her. She was now able to meet her enemy's glance, flash by flash. "He's my father!" she exclaimed, refusing to shrink back as the mockingly deferential figure came a step or two nearer. "And I know just how and when those papers were taken from his private desk! And I know they were brought to this room, and are in this room now!"

THE Russian was no longer smiling. He continued to stroke his beard, slowly and meditatively. "And what else do you know?" he inquired. His eyes traveled to the safelock, as though his mind was pondering from just what quarter she had learned the secret of its combination.

"I know you have the official reports of the Hampton Roads projectile tests and the Navy Department's secret photographs of the Katahdin armor plate experiments! And I know that as a spy you can be given ten years' imprisonment for dealing in information about our coast defenses!"

She seemed to puzzle him, though it was obvious he was making every effort to conceal his actual feelings. Skeel, with his eye glued to the door chink, waited for the next move.

"And how do you know I have these reports and photographs?" calmly demanded the foreigner.

"Because I have just taken them from this safe of yours," was the woman's resolute answer.

He looked at her with his first show of anger. "And you intend to keep them?" he demanded.

The woman's hand went up to her bosom instinctively. "I have more right to them than you have!" was her defiant retort. "They're not yours! They never were yours!"

"You are verree mistaken," was the other's quick answer. "This is my room. Everything in it is mine. And I shall see that it remains mine!"

The woman's resolute young face took on an expression of almost childlike stubbornness. Her color had come back to her, touching her with a look of girlishness that was surprising to the watching Skeel. "You can't do that!" she declared, with the cloak already over her left arm.

"Pardon, Mademoiselle!" murmured the Russian, with his impassive shrug. "But there are other things that cannot be done. Ladies, however charming they may be, cannot enter private rooms and rifle a safe!"

"You hire other people to do it for you!" cried the woman. "You haven't the courage to do it with your own hand!"

The Russian laughed. Then he reached down into the right-hand pocket of his dressing jacket. A little shiver sped up and down Skeel's tired legs as he realized that the bearded foreigner was reaching for his revolver.

"Consider," the man in the camelhair jacket was saying, in his calm and ironic perfunctoriness. "The owner of the room might return unexpectedly. In the darkness he might see the figure at the safe. A burglar, a thief, he might conclude. So! Is it not natural that he should do it in a manner—pardon—such as this?"

THE Russian, as he spoke, was backing slowly toward the hall doorway. He moved away from the woman, who still stood in front of the open safe, veering off until he caught at the green velvet curtain with his left hand. Then he quickly lifted the revolver from his pocket and pointed it directly at the woman in front of him. She blinked at it a little, Skeel could see; but she did not shrink away from where she stood.

"So!" said the Russian, with a sudden and unexpected change of manner. His voice too had become different, almost raucous, as he went on. "Every paper you have, everything you took from that safe, put down on that chair beside you! Everything, at once, or I shall kill you where you stand!"

The revolver, Skeel could see, was pointed at her breast. And the face of the man who held the firearm was now something not lovely to the eye. His very beard seemed to have lost its sleekness. It seemed to distend itself and bristle up ludicrously, like the fur of an indignant cat.

The woman did not move. She had again lost some of her color; but otherwise she stood apparently unaffected by the danger confronting her. "This is nonsense!" she said, as she stared at the man with the revolver. "It's nonsense, and you know it!"

Her hardheaded practicality seemed to puzzle him, but only for a moment. He brought down a foot, shod in patent leather, with a stamp of rage. That gesture, to the watching Skeel, seemed as finicky and foolish as the movement of a peevish dancing master.

"Is it nonsense?" he demanded, thrusting forward his

His Return to Unctuous Good Nature Seemed to Perturb the Woman. "What Other Ways?" She Less Calmly Demanded.



claret tinged face, like a fighting cock preparing for battle.

"I'm not afraid of it," rejoined the woman very quietly.

The Russian raised the hammer of his revolver; but still the woman did not wince.

"You can't murder me here in the heart of Washington, you know. It's quite out of the question. You seem to forget they don't do such things in hotels like this. And you seem to forget who I am!"

There was the slightest touch of scorn on her lips as she leaned back against the safetop. The note of derision in her voice seemed to sober her enemy. The Russian stared at her for several seconds; then his arm slowly sank to his side. He looked down at the revolver doubtfully, and then up at the woman again. Then he dropped the firearm into his dressing jacket pocket. Then he laughed aloud, showing the white of his teeth through the thick dark beard. It was not altogether a pleasant laugh.

"You are right," he acknowledged, with his ironic bow. "It would be foolish. It would be so—so unnecessary. And there are other ways!"

His return to unctuous good nature seemed to perturb the woman confronting him. "What other ways?" she less calmly demanded.

The Russian by this time was once more meditatively stroking and caressing his mustache. Her eyes widened a little as he slowly stepped toward her. "That you shall see!" he answered with an insolent languor that made her suddenly glance about the room again, as though some overlooked avenue of escape might present itself to her. Then she stared back at her enemy; for by this time he was quite close to her.

SHE stepped from in front of the safe as his hand went out to catch at her. She dodged away from him, until her back was against the wall, directly beneath the milky-globed electric light. Skeel, as he saw her under that revealing glare, was surprised at her youthfulness. He had thought her a woman touched with a woman's maturity. Yet he saw for the first time that she was little more than a girl, a girl who at any other time would have been archly sure of herself, redolent of the loyalties and the illusions and the audacities of untamed youth.

"Don't dare to touch me!" she cried, desperate and indignant. "Don't dare!" And again, as he heard that foolishly girlish cry, Skeel was astonished at the thought of her youthful blindness.

"I will dare much more than that," said the Russian, calmly studying her face under the strong light. He too was not insensible of its beauty. His pallor suddenly increased. Of the two faces, Skeel saw, the man's was now the whiter.

"You seem to forget," cried the girl against the wall, "that one word over that telephone will bring an officer to this room, a dozen men to that door!" She was frightened now; but still courageous.

"No word will go over that telephone," corrected the man in front of her. He folded his arms with the insolence of assured superiority. His captive cast a quick glance toward the window. She was breathing quicker and harder by this time.

"There are a hundred friends of mine under this roof, in this hotel," she cried, her voice rising higher and higher, "a hundred men who would make you answer for this insult, a hundred men who'd knock down that door and drag you off where you belong! Do you hear? And if you come one inch closer to me I'll call for help!"

The bearded man in the rough haired dressing jacket raised a deprecatory hand. "You are a clever young woman," he said, so quietly that Skeel could scarcely hear him; "but it is not wise to enter a room as you have done. It is never wise to break open a locked safe. It is never wise to steal, however much you may desire what you have stolen."

"That would be a good thing for you to remember."

"You have papers, my papers, hidden there in your dress," he calmly went on. Yet he was quite close to her, and towering over her as he spoke.

The two heads, so different in appearance, staring at each other so closely, in some way reminded Skeel of a Zoo visitor face to face with a caged man killer. But in this instance, with the knowledge that no barrier stood between them, curiosity was eclipsed by rising terror.

The woman suddenly thrust a hand into the bosom of her gown and drew forth a handful of crumpled papers. Her fingers were shaking visibly as she held these papers out to her captor. "You can have them back!" she gasped. "Take them, and let me go!"

His large white hand slowly lifted itself toward the papers. But instead of clutching them his fingers closed on the woman's wrist.

"Now let me go!" she sobbed, scarcely realizing what his movement meant. He had crowded still closer to her as she crouched back against the wall.

"I will never let you go!" he murmured.

She was writhing and twisting in his grasp by this time, trying to wrench her gloved hand free.

"And if those beautiful lips begin to scream, I shall cover them with my own," he said.

Skeel could no longer see the man's face; but there must have been something horrifying in it, for the woman, as she stared up at it, emitted an audible and repeated "Oh!" of terror with each quick rise and fall of her bare shoulders.

"Stop!" she panted. "Stop, or I'll call to them! I'll call for help! For help!"

Her voice rose on that repeated word of "Help!" until it became a call in itself, until it mounted into an actual cry of terror, to be cut off by the sudden and cyclonic movement of the figure towering above her.

SKEEL, shaking with a palsy like movement of the knees, could see that huge figure as it unexpectedly swung forward. The smaller figure in its sheathing of pale blue seemed to be enveloped, absorbed, swallowed up, by the shaggier mass above it. Skeel could even see the bearded face as it blotted out the white and upturned face of the woman, as the contaminating gross mouth met and silenced her terrified lips.

There seemed something unspeakably revolting and animal like in even the shaggy haired jacket that covered the larger figure, something that seemed to make it one with animals still in the feral state, something that sent a shudder through Skeel's body and brought a blur of red before his eyes.

He had no distinct memory of how he wrenched the glass towel bar from the white tiled wall beside him. He had no memory of swinging open the door and vaulting out across the carpeted floor of the larger room.

But indelibly fixed in his mind was the picture of that huge and shaggy figure menacing and contaminating the frail one. There seemed something unspeakably odious about it, something antediluvian and Adamic. He remembered too the white lights of the polished skin that glistened through the thin and carefully combed tendrils of hair trained across the bald skull. He remembered that smooth and shining skull; but he had no memory of raising the bar of glass in his hand or aiming his blow.

He remembered the sound of the impact, muffled and nauseating; but it seemed that in some way a hand not his own had brought it about. He remembered how the head fell forward, and the body, in going down, forced the figure in blue back against the wall. He remembered dropping the rod of glass and throwing out a hand to catch her; how, in fact, he had to hold her there, shaking and panting, while the two of them stared stupidly down at the prostrate bearded figure.

A dull horror spread over the young woman's face. She became almost a dead weight on Skeel's sustaining

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THE BUTTON THIEF

Continued from page 9

arm. He could feel the satinlike pressure of her skin against his moist wristbone.

"He's dead!" she cried in a broken voice; for such things were new to her. Skeel himself had more than once noted the effect of patrolmen's nightsticks and longshoremen's billys. And more than once he had been led to marvel at the solidity of the human skull.

"Oh, he's dead—he's dead!" The woman began to sob brokenly, swaying a little from side to side.

Skeel laughed a laugh of happy hysteria. His mild and sedentary soul was just emerging from its first red mist of atavistic delirium. "It'll do him good!" he cried, amazed, a moment later, at his own stupendous audacity.

"But we've killed him!" moaned the girl, turning her terror wrinkled face to the youth at her side. She stopped sobbing and continued to look at him, as though realizing for the first time that he was a stranger to her.

"No, we haven't," avowed Skeel, tingling at the thought of being bracketed, even in that troubled moment, with a being so beautiful. "Look at his legs twitch! He's bound to be out of that trance inside of three minutes!"

She looked down at the Russian. He lay there with his arms crooked up, like the wings of a duck shot in midair. "What can we do?" she said at last, turning back to Skeel.

That youth, with his free hand, drew a chair over to where she stood and let her sink into it. Then he stooped and caught up the crumpled papers from the floor. "Take these," he commanded.

She took them, with a look of wonder in her eyes.

This look of wonder increased as she watched him jerk a framed print of Millet's "Goose Girl" from the wall above her head. One blow on the safetop smashed into a dozen scattering pieces the glass that covered the face of the picture. He tore away the picture itself, and drew out a layer of blueprints pressed together behind it. These he folded together into one packet.

"The coast defense plans and the projectile test reports," he said, not wholly unconscious of the dramatic values that lurked in the laconism. "Stolen from your father's desk!"

He held them out to her. But her eyes, instead of studying the papers, were turned up to his face.

"Quick, take them!" he brusquely told her, a little disconcerted by her stare. "Our time is short."

She was still studying his intent and exalted young face. "Are you in the service?" she asked.

He was compelled to confess that he was not.

"Then why are you—" She did not complete the sentence; for at that moment the man on the floor moved one hand a little. It was the hand on which glimmered the heavily jeweled ring.

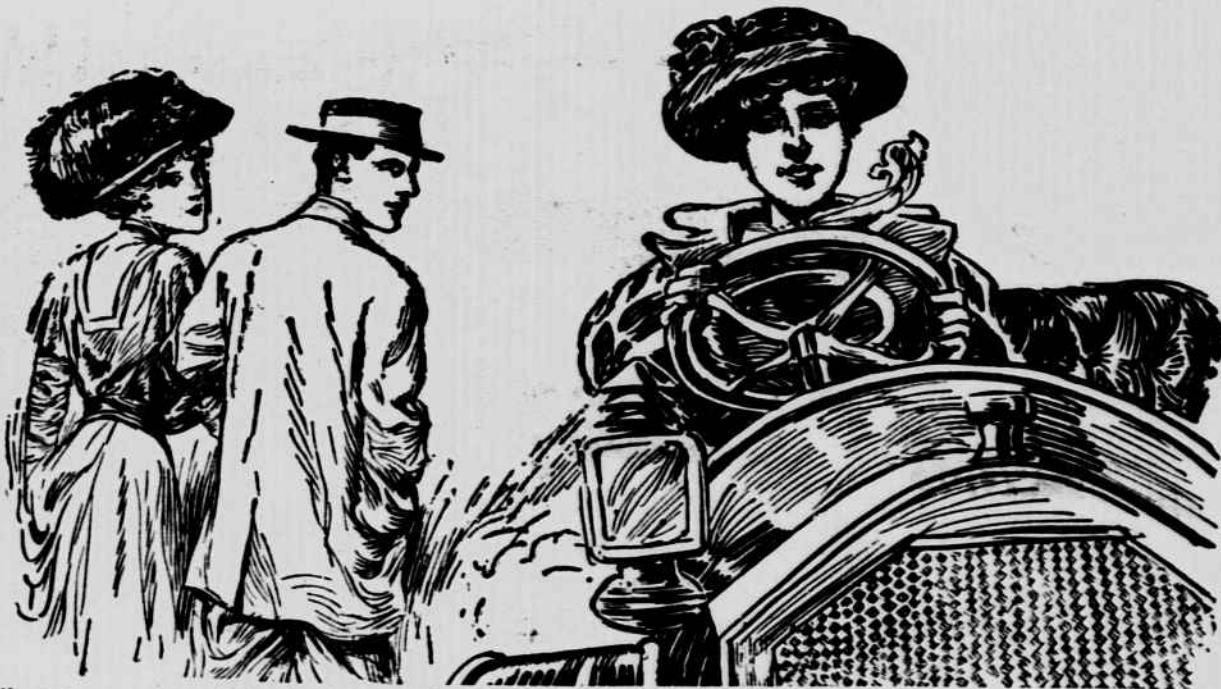
"Quick!" cried Skeel, thrusting the blueprints into her hand. "You must go first. You've got to go now, while you have the chance!"

"And what will you do?" asked the young woman.

Skeel felt a little nervously in his vest pocket. He wanted to make sure the bone collar button was still there. "Yes," he said a little vacantly. "I've got to go too. In fact, I'm—I'm horribly late."

At the precise moment that the moist browed Skeel stepped into the banquet hall and slipped into his place near the end of the speakers' table, the orchestra struck up the national anthem, and the entire company of diners, enthusiastically cheering and waving their table napkins, rose to their feet.

That astonished youth, for one breathless and perturbed moment, imagined the demonstration was in some way meant as a tribute to him; for the wine of his adventure was still singing through the upper chambers of his giddy young head. Then it dawned on him, as the music ceased and the diners resumed their seats, that ten paces from him the President of the United States stood in the middle of the flag draped dais, waiting to begin his response to the first toast of the evening. And Skeel, as Brigadier General Van Allen leaned over and solicitously inquired as to the cause of his delay, whispered back that he had been having a bit of trouble with his equipment. But he did not explain that this trouble had come from so trifling a thing as a broken collar button.



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